

STATEMENT OF
CHAIRMAN STEVEN LATOURETTE
RAILROAD SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING
HEARING ON
CURRENT FRA SAFETY INITIATIVES
JUNE 27, 2006

Good morning. This Subcommittee hearing will come to order. I want to welcome all of our Members and witnesses to today's hearing on Current FRA Safety Initiatives.

According to the Federal Railroad Administration, seventy percent of train derailments are caused by either defective track conditions or human factors such as fatigue.

The FRA, along with railroad management and labor, have been working to reduce the number of derailments by the introduction of new operating rules, implementation of new inspection procedures, and the development of new technologies.

For example, most railroad track is still inspected by track walkers or employees driving slowly down the track in hyrail vehicles. This era is coming to an end as the FRA deploys automated track inspection vehicles capable of inspecting hundreds of miles per day.

Other new technologies, such as Positive Train Control, have the potential to eliminate head-on collisions and derailments caused by misaligned switches.

And the rail vehicles themselves are becoming safer due to extensive collision testing by the FRA, the Volpe Center and the Transportation Technology Center in Colorado.

Unfortunately, all these new technologies will have only a marginal impact on one critical aspect of rail safety.

The sad fact is that most railroad fatalities involve grade crossing collisions or trespassers on the right-of-way.

This is doubly unfortunate because railroad employees work so hard to follow the rules. Railroad employees are given extensive safety training. They are required to comply with numerous company operating rules, complex federal regulations and mandatory drug testing.

But even the most conscientious railroad employee cannot rewrite the laws of physics. Trains can take over a mile to stop. A locomotive cannot steer out of the way of an errant pedestrian or drunken motorist. And any engineer will tell you that hitting the emergency brake creates the risk of a derailment.

I take all this very seriously, and hope that today's hearing serves as an encouragement to all those men and women who strive day-by-day to make our railroads safe.